

Academic Library Sessions: Experiences and Challenges of Nazarbayev University Library

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Purpose of the Study

The Reference Department of the Nazarbayev University Library is responsible for the development and delivery of library sessions and workshops. These are offered as part of the educational process and partnership in supporting curricular and research needs as well as to enhance the lifelong learning experience of our library users. The following categories of sessions are provided: library orientation, instruction sessions, information sessions and publishers/partners sessions. These sessions will ultimately become part of the structured information literacy program of the library. The paper seeks to describe, evaluate and assess the library sessions and workshops conducted in 2017. The paper also defines the challenges faced by librarians in conducting the sessions. Another objective is to identify improvements for raising effectiveness in organizing and delivering the library sessions.

Methodology

Data from the 2017 online registration and evaluation will be used for this study. A customized registration form was built using Springshare's LibCal tool to identify the affiliation and background information of the participants. It provides a report on the number of registered participants versus the actual number of those who attend the sessions. A follow-up evaluation form is sent to the registered participants one hour after attending a library session. This form is sent using Springshare's LibCal feature and was created using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. It uses a 5-item scale to measure the delivery and execution of each session from: excellent, very satisfactory, satisfactory, needs improvement, and poor. A 10-item survey questionnaire evaluating several aspects of the session is then answered by the participant.

Findings

An effective way to invite participants to register for a library session is through a community email announcement. The most attractive topics were those related to literature search, use and creation of multimedia objects, and how to find data. Only 27% of the total number of registered participants showed-up during the sessions. Among all the criteria, the venue and technologies were rated as other than excellent due to the venue being an open space. Most participants agreed that librarian-instructors and presentation materials were of high quality. The majority of attendees intended to practically apply the knowledge received during the sessions.

Keywords: user education, library instruction, information literacy, Kazakhstan

Introduction

The Reference Department of the Nazarbayev University Library is responsible for the development and delivery of library sessions and workshops (NULITS, 2017). These are offered to support the curricular and research needs of our users, as well as to enhance their lifelong learning experience.

In 2016, changes were made in terms of the organization and management of the reference sessions. The sessions were divided into different categories and a coordinator was appointed for each. The coordinator was responsible for the organization, scheduling, monitoring, and reporting on the session. In June 2017, approval of a new policy provided guidance for responsible librarians to facilitate the implementation of high quality library session services. The policy determines the definition and objectives for each category of session, defines responsibilities and guidelines for coordinators and instructors, and describes privacy in terms of personal data. In handling various types of reference sessions, there was a need to monitor the value and content of each session delivered by the subject librarians. To date, the Information Literacy program is yet to be established and there is no single format that each subject librarian follows to deliver any kind of reference / library sessions. The session and workshop policy may be found at this link: http://nu.kz.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=31256372

Objectives

Ideally, library sessions should be delivered in a standardized way. A simple session and workshop policy does not suffice to guide subject librarians. With this gap in mind, the paper seeks to describe, evaluate and assess the library sessions and workshops conducted in 2017, after the initial publication of this new reference policy. The paper also defines the challenges faced by librarians in conducting the

sessions. Lastly, the paper will also identify improvements for raising effectiveness in organizing and delivering the library sessions.

Review of Related Literature

ODLIS (2018) defines a reference librarian as:

A librarian who works in public services, answering questions posed by library patrons at a reference desk, by telephone, or via e-mail. A reference librarian may also be called upon to provide point-of-use instruction on the use of library resources and information technology.

The primary duty of a reference librarian is to answer reference questions and to train users on how to access and retrieve the library collection, sources, and tools (Yusuf, 2011). They should be able to establish a good rapport with their users and effectively communicate the information needed by the user. Librarians have a social responsibility to become role models in helping the community members think and learn (Lankes, 2015).

A reference librarian is expected to provide user education (sometimes referred as bibliographic instruction) programs that will support the lifelong learning experience of a library user (Liu, Lo & Itsumura, 2016). Examples of user education programs are library orientations (Liu, Lo & Itsumura, 2016), one-shot sessions (Cordell, 2013), library instruction (Nevius, Ettien, Link & Sobel, 2018), special or themed library sessions or workshops (Rinto & Cogbill-Seiders, 2015; Manuel, 2003; Giannini, 2013), and publisher sessions / subject-specific online database training (Garg & Turtle, 2003; Donlan, 2017). As a concrete example, the Amelia V. Gallucci-Cirio Library enumerated types of one shot library instruction sessions available in their library. Their sessions may be done on campus, online or at a preferred location (Fitchburg State University, 2018).

Assessing User Education Programs

Library assessments are important components of library development and quality assurance (Staley, Branch & Hewitt, 2010). In order to improve any library program, there should be a uniform approach to assessment. The librarians at San Jose State University developed an online assessment tool to gauge students' scores before and after library instruction. Questions were reviewed to meet certain standards in conducting information literacy. Their study showed that there is a way to assess students' learning before and after attending a library instruction session. Brage & Svensson (2011), writing about another programme, pointed out that they were able to assess the IL skills of medical students in collaboration with the medical faculty. For example, the students needed to defend how they were able to seek information and how they were able to solve particular problems. They refer to this kind of activity as problem-based learning.

Challenges of Reference Librarians in Handling Information Literacy

One major factor that hinders the establishment of a good information literacy program is a lack of a collaborative relationship between faculty member and librarian. Teaching faculties have a role to play when it comes to encouraging their students to use libraries and integrate information literacy sessions in their classes (Kavulya, 2003). The lack of coordination between faculty is a struggle when it comes to implement an information literacy program. The academic community should understand the importance of integrating information literacy in the curriculum. University support and faculty-librarian collaboration will help advance the user's information literacy skills. They should be able to develop teaching materials together and create a jointevaluation form (Maitaouthong, T., Tuamsuk, K., & Tachamanee, Y., 2012).

Methodology

Data were gathered through the registration form and survey to assess the information sessions. A customized registration form was built on Springshare's LibCal tool to identify the affiliation and background information of the participants. LibCal is a library-smart calendar tool which acts as an online room reservation system, with a customizable personal scheduler for one-on-one research consultations, and a template-based management tool for maintaining library hours. The library sessions and workshops benefited from the following features:

- Media-rich, informative event pages
- Customized event sign-up forms
- Calendar & event widgets for embedding on web-pages and Libguides
- Automatic publishing and promotion of events on Facebook
- Automatic notification about registration, event reminders for registrants and automatic customised follow-up emails
- Detailed statistics reports on the number of events, registrations, of cancellations, and actual attendees.

The customized registration form gave a report on the number of registered participants versus the actual number of those who attended the sessions. The form also asked whether participants attended other library sessions and how they learned about the workshops.

A follow-up evaluation form was automatically distributed to the registered participants one hour after the end of the library session using LibCal. The form was created using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. It used a 5-item scale to measure the delivery and execution of each session from: excellent,

very satisfactory, satisfactory, needs improvement, and poor. A 10-item survey questionnaire evaluating several aspects of the session was then answered by the participants. Open ended questions were asked to identify how participants hoped to apply knowledge from the session and to obtain suggestions for topics to be developed in the future as well as aspects for improvement. The survey responses could be anonymous.

Findings and Discussion

Instruction and orientation sessions were designed with the aim to introduce students, faculty and staff to the collection, facilities, organization, and services of the library, provide support to the effective and efficient use and evaluation of library information resources, and to develop a relationship between the library and academic departments on campus.

Orientation sessions reach new students as well as new faculty and staff in introducing key services, overview of the resources and demonstration of how to find materials. In the beginning of the fall semester, subject librarians schedule orientation sessions with the school managers. This included library tours and presentations which could be held in the library or on campus.

The instruction sessions were organized and delivered by subject librarians who were assigned to each school. They talk about library resources and are course-integrated or course-related subject focused. One-shot class sessions were designed in collaboration or by request by faculty teaching research classes. The session may include introduction to citation tools and library resources, developing advanced skills for locating, evaluating and information retrieval, and use of specific subject databases. These sessions were planned as part of the Information Literacy program.

- Information (drop-in) sessions were offered to promote and provide foundation for lifelong learning, advancing competency skills necessary for coursework, research, career, education, and personal information needs. The programs ranged from half-an-hour information sessions or one-hour hands-on workshops and are aligned with the academic calendar. Some sessions on the same topics were offered across the semester and year. Although applied separately, the topics were recurrent, aiming to develop skills and acquire competencies included in IL standards. They included the following: Data management (understanding data, DMP, search and citing data, visualization)
- Open Access issues and scholarly communication
- Information security and privacy
- Multimedia: video, images, maps, and visualizations

- Research networking and collaboration
- Financial literacy
- GIS
- Literature review tools
- Patent search
- Research and postgraduate strategies
- E-mail communication
- Reading news and media

The reference librarians are involved in building better relations with publishers, information providers and partners whose representatives visit the university and facilitate meetings and trainings with librarians, decision makers, professors, and students. The publishers feature their tools or new products, services for instructors, guidelines in scholarly communication and help authors understand the peer-review process, if they intend to publish. The librarian in-charge of collaboration with the Department of E-resources Management constantly update each other to provide an online webinar offered by the publisher.

Schedule of sessions are available online and everyone can reserve their slot prior to the start of the workshop. Apart from the online calendar found on the library webpage, print posters were placed around the campus and inside the library to make sure everyone knew about the upcoming sessions. E-mail announcements were also sent to all the Nazarbayev University community for which the email marketing tool Mailerlite was used. This tool allows the creation of stylish emails.

There was a total of 171 library sessions in 2017. The breakdown is as follows: 90 (52.6%) one-shot, 33 (19.9%) reference, 25 (15.1%) orientation, and 23 (13.7%) publisher and others.

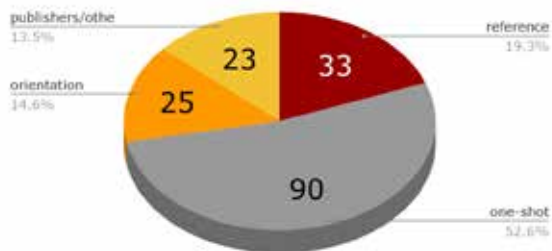


Figure 1: The number of sessions by categories

The chart below shows the number of sessions in 2016–2017

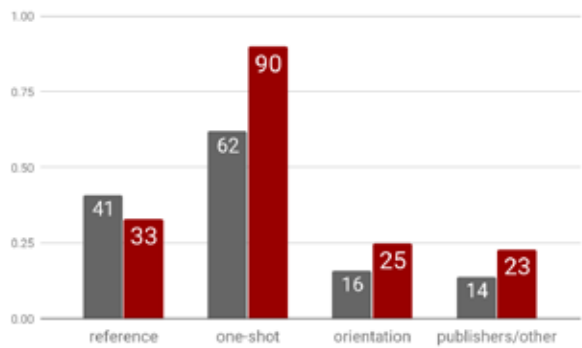


Figure 2: The number of sessions by categories in 2016–2017

Overall, the number of delivered sessions in each category rose, while reference trainings slightly decreased from 41 to 33. The one-shot sessions were especially high in 2017, increasing from 62 to 90. The factor that lead to the increase of attendees was the variety of topics and workshops provided by the subject librarians.

New undergraduate and masters programs helped in the rise of orientation sessions: 16 and 25 in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

In 2017, the library drew a total attendance of 3,689. One-shot sessions reached 2,048 students and faculty, information sessions attracted 120 people (3.4%), orientation sessions were mandatory for 1,309 (35.4%) students, 239 (6.5%) attended publisher and other sessions.

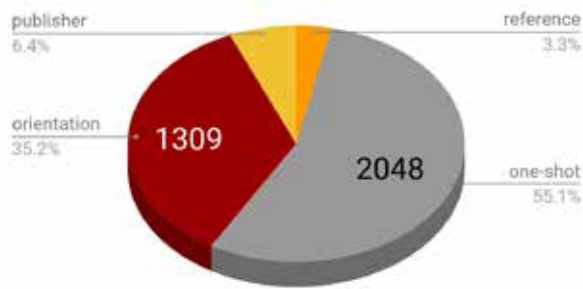


Figure 3: The number of sessions' attendees

The graph below illustrates an increase of attendees over 2016–2017.

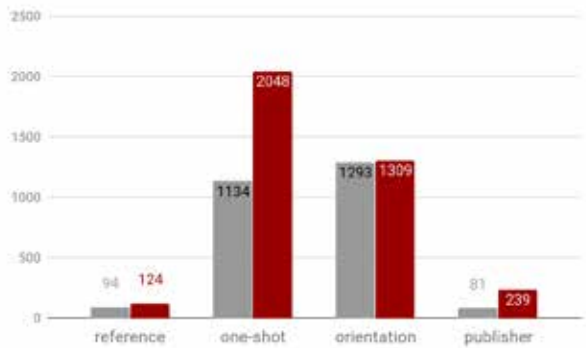


Figure 4: The number of attendees

The number of students who attended information sessions in 2016 was 38 (40.4%) increasing to 54 (40%) in 2017, the participation of NU staff in 2016 was 56 (59.6%) and 70 (56.4%) in 2017.

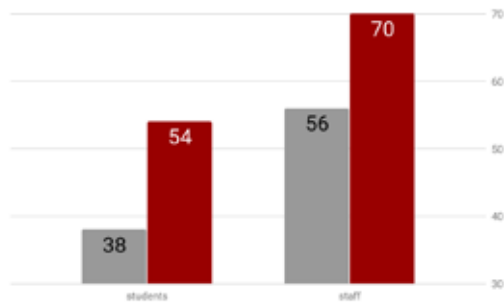


Figure 5: The number of information sessions attendees by categories

The study showed that an effective way to disseminate information is by sending a community email announcement. Sixty-eight respondents learned about information sessions and workshops from e-mails, twenty-four from the library website, eight from a friend or colleague, one each from posters, Facebook account of the library, orientation session and Moodle account. One respondent stated that information dissemination about workshops should be improved within the library to facilitate navigation and increase awareness about past and future training sessions. The registration results demonstrate that the most attractive topics were those related to literature search, use and creation of multimedia objects, and how to find data.

While there are more than 70 planned sessions, only 33 were actually delivered due to a low number of registered attendees. Out of the 335 registered attendees only 124 showed up.

One hour after attending the session, the participants were asked to rate the quality of the session. This evaluation survey noted the weaknesses and strengths in the organization and delivery of information sessions.

When asked about the venue, 60% said it was excellent, 28% said it was average, and 8% said it was below average. It was suggested that the venue needs “a better ventilation system” and a separate room should be reserved for training. One respondent recommended that “we just need a better venue to encourage more attendees,” and another reported that the “library has no quiet area to do such kind of meetings, which is sad”. About a quarter of the respondents suggested that the library should have enough laptop charging power sockets and that there should be a way to project the presentation of the instructor.

A lot of the participants are happy with the instructors’ presentation. 84.6% said that they will practically apply the knowledge they gained in the workshops. Some of them noted that they can use it during their research, assignments and even at their work.

Patron feedback is a very important aspect in library development and we made sure that we carried out an annual library survey about library space, services, resources and technologies used. In 2017, 109 responses (69.4%) were collected related to library sessions. The majority of the participants (45.9%) were undecided as to how they would evaluate the library sessions. More than a quarter (26%) rated the service as excellent, almost a third said they were good. Only four had a bad experience and evaluated the sessions as fair and poor – 2.8% and 0.9%, respectively.

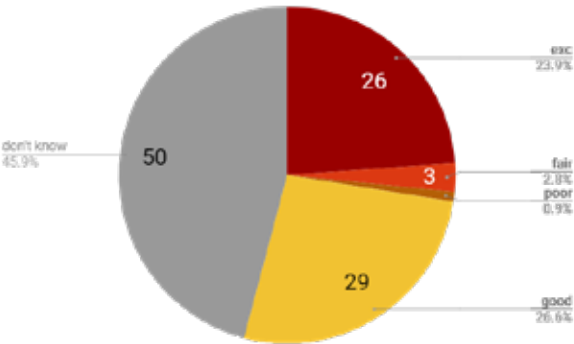


Figure 6: The rating of the library sessions

The librarians had several challenges in handling the library sessions. One of them is the fact that there is a low turnout of interested students. Only a few of them register and not all of those who registered show-up. Just 27% of those who register attend the actual session.

The absence of a real training room is also a dilemma. Although there are computer labs and special rooms that can be booked in the schools' buildings, the decision was to provide workshops in the library to separate them from the other class-related sessions. Furthermore, the library wanted to conduct the session inside the library for branding reasons.

In some cases, workshops had a mixed groups of students and staff with different academic levels and it becomes difficult to address all of their concerns. The information needs assessment of the community should also be taken into consideration.

Since the NU Library is not the solo department in NU which provides workshops for the purpose of continuing education, it keeps on competing with other NU departments like the NU Career and Advising Center, NURIS, and Academic Writing Centre.

In order to improve the library sessions, here are some suggestions from the library patrons:

- Improve the venue to have a better learning experience;
- Better time management to make sure the time rendered by the instructor can be used very wisely
- There should be enough working space equipped with the best facilities
- All library personnel should be aware of the activities of the library
- Think of more interesting topics to be discussed
- Collaboration between a faculty and a librarian to offer more subject-specific workshops.

Conclusion

In conclusion, library sessions, workshops and information literacy programs are very helpful in the personal growth of a student's life. Eventually, it will also affect their professional life when they are ready to produce cutting-edge research outputs. User education programs attest that the role of reference librarians is very important in nurturing the information-seeking and evaluation skills of the students and even faculty members who were not yet fully acquainted with information literacy. With a variety of library sessions offered, the reference librarians continue to prepare the students to become information literate. Users'

satisfaction with the sessions is high, although its value cannot be seen by the large number of attendees. Following the suggestions from the patrons, the reference librarians shall listen to their needs and will try to keep-up with the recent developments in their specific subject areas. This was the first time NU library sessions were evaluated and assessed and we are hoping to have a better impact in the future.

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